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Historical Thinking Beyond the Classroom [History]

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Assignment Title: Historical Thinking Beyond the Classroom

This assignment was designed to be used in global history survey courses, which are primarily taken by students with little prior experience in college-level history, and who will not go on to major in History. It has not yet been used, but it is best suited for use in SSH 106 (World History from 1500) and/or SSH 110 (East Asian Civilizations)—courses currently not designated with any one of LaGuardia’s core competencies and communication abilities. These are both writing intensive courses, wherein LaGuardia’s Written Communication Ability can be reinforced. They employ a number of primary and secondary sources to help students engage critically with the discipline of history while also developing important skills in analytical thinking and communication. The assignment outlined below is a reflective, end-of-term writing assignment that is meant to both draw out and synthesize themes about refugees and war from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s edited volume, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*. It also aims to get students to both consider the transferrable skills they can take away from the course, and to better understand the meaning and importance of “historical empathy.” The assignment directly addresses the skills that the Global Learning Core Competency aims to hone, namely critical analyses and engagement with complex global systems and legacies. This assignment is the culmination and reflection upon of several weeks of reading assignments, but the assignment itself takes only one week to complete (the 1-2 page reflection paper). The assignment is worth 10%-15% of the overall grade, similar to a midterm or exam. The readings for this assignment came directly from the Spring 2019 NEH funded Meanings of War seminar syllabus. The assignment was developed for the seminar, and was workshopped and improved upon by my colleagues’ feedback.

Required Reading (First 3 readings have been assigned throughout the semester):

- From *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*:
 - o Nguyen, “Introduction”
 - o Dorfman, “How Succulent Food Defeated Trump’s Wall Before It Has Been Built”
 - o Yang, “Refugee Children: The Yang Warriors”

(Note: other readings from the book can be added/subtracted depending on geographic/thematic focus of the history course)

- Alterman, “The Decline of Historical Thinking,” (Feb. 4, 2019 New Yorker piece)
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-decline-of-historical-thinking>

The Assignment:

This semester, we have read many primary and secondary sources to help us build an understanding of World/Asian history from multiple perspectives. In doing so, you have not only learned new information, but you have gained important transferable skills such as critical and analytical thinking and writing. For this assignment, I would like you to reflect on how and why some of the primary sources you read have provided you with useful tools that you can use beyond this classroom.

Before writing your essay, please read Eric Alterman’s February 2019 New Yorker article, which highlights a nation-wide decline in history majors and a dangerous decline in “historical thinking.” In your short essay, you will use the three primary sources (first-hand accounts) you have read from *The Displaced* in order to reflect on and write about the “historical thinking” tools you have gained this semester. Specifically, I would like you to consider how reading personal narrative accounts of historical situations (in this case by displaced people called “refugees”) has helped you develop your “historical thinking” skills.

Your short essay (1-2 double-spaced pages) should have three parts:

- 1) Define what Alterman means in his article by “historical thinking,” including why it is important and why he argues it is in decline in the United States today.
- 2) Choose one of the personal accounts from *The Displaced* and use it to discuss how it helped shape your historical thinking. Did a first-hand account make you more empathetic to the historical circumstances that these individuals found themselves in? Did it help to change or enhance your understanding of war and its far-reaching consequences? (If yes, please use at least one direct quote to support your claims. If not, please explain clearly why you did not feel it impacted your understanding.)
- 3) Finally, using Alterman’s discussion of how important historical thinking is to a functioning civic society, please explain how the knowledge you gained through reading the

personal account of a refugee might help you be a better citizen. For example, can you think of a situation in which better understanding the plight of refugees will help you make better, more informed, more nuanced decisions? Could it help you look at or empathize with a situation differently? Please try to conclude your short essay with a persuasive statement about how your historical thinking skills have improved and why this matters.